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ABSTRACT

This project explored the learning interchanges which took place between early childhood student teachers and young children, provoked by three-dimensional installations within a children's art exhibition. The exhibition, comprising both two- and three-dimensional artworks, contained over 280 artworks from 15 early childhood programs in the southwest region of Queensland. Children aged between 17 months and 6 years came to the gallery to see their own artworks and the artworks of other children. The project focused on the three-dimensional installations, which generated substantial dialogue and creative expression among the children and student teachers. The project encompassed four phases of investigation: (1) children's responses to and interactions with the three-dimensional artworks at the exhibition; (2) student teachers' exploration of symbolic representation within the context of the exhibition; (3) student teachers' extension of children's representations through a process of sharing their own symbolic representations with children; and (4) children/student teacher exchanges of creative works within their respective contexts. (Contains 15 references.) (BT)

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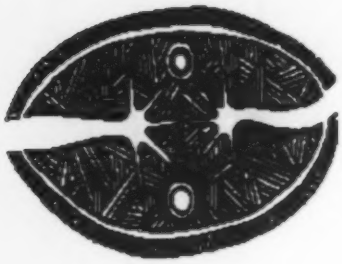

"A Unique Pedagogical Project Contextualised within a Children's Art Exhibition"

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A Unique Pedagogical Project Contextualised within a Children's Art Exhibition

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This project explores the learning interchanges, which took place between early childhood students and young children, provoked by 3-dimensional installations within a children's art exhibition. The exhibition, comprising both 2- and 3-dimensional artworks, was held during a national week of child advocacy in Australia organized by the Australian Early Childhood Association. Over 280 artworks from fifteen early childhood programs in the south-west region of Queensland were exhibited, and children aged between 17 months to six years of age were represented. Throughout the duration of the art exhibition children came to visit the gallery to see their own artworks and the artworks of other children.

The focus of this project concerned the 3-dimensional installations, which generated substantial dialogue and creative expression amongst children and early childhood student teachers that visited the exhibition. These responses were documented, with the aim of helping the students develop deeper understandings of children's symbolic representation, and the potential for this to be extended into other forms of representation.

Children expressed interest in all artworks, however, their responses to constructions were notably different from their responses to 2-dimensional works. The power of the 3-dimensional installations titled "Rapunzel's Castle," "The Giant", and the "Coal-Making Machine" to evoke stories, expressive movement, dialogue, and questioning highlighted the potential of 3-dimensional media to act as protagonists for new thinking. These installations, and others within the exhibition, acted as pivots for transactions in thinking between children and students.

Students visiting the exhibition were guided by the lecturer in their own story-making process, prompted by children's 3-dimensional symbolic expressions. The aim was to engage students in a process whereby children's representations stimulated new thinking in the students. Students chose to develop their own stories and dramatizations using one or more of the installations as an inspiration for their thinking. The outcome was the sharing of new stories and dramatizations with children back in their own programs, particularly with those who had created the artworks.

As the students' stories were gradually shared with children during the months after the exhibition, it became evident that these representations acted as a further stimulus for new thinking and symbolic expression in young children, through a range of expressive arts. The process commenced an ongoing exchange, which is still taking place, and which has extended beyond the original installations. New artworks, stories, and other forms of creative expression are being developed in both the early childhood settings and the university setting, and are being exchanged to stimulate ongoing symbolic expression of both the children and the students.

Four phases of the study

The study encompassed four phases of investigation as follows:

Phase 1: Children's responses to, and interactions with, the 3-dimensional artworks at the exhibition,

Phase 2: Student teacher's exploration of symbolic representation within the context of the exhibition,

Phase 3: Student teacher's extension of children's representations (i.e., art, stories, and enactments) through a process of sharing their own symbolic representations with children, and

Phase 4: Children/Student-Teacher exchanges of creative works within their respective contexts.

The unique features of this project are:

- 3-dimensional installations acting as powerful protagonists in thinking, stimulating various forms of symbolic expression in young children and in students

- respective symbolic expressions becoming a vehicle for learning exchanges between young children and students, both within the art exhibition and subsequent to the exhibition

- learning exchanges between student teachers and children involving two kinds of pedagogical mediation — cognitive (as represented by the installations, stories, dramas, and dances) and interpersonal (as achieved through the guidance of the university lecturer/researcher and the teachers in their early childhood programs). An important point to note here is that the children and the students did not have face-to-face communication.

Results

Phase 1: Children's interactions and responses to the 3-dimensional artworks in the exhibition

It is widely known that children seek to represent their ideas through many forms of symbolization, and that artistic symbolization is a significant form of expression, communication, and meaning-making in early childhood (Eisner, 1990; Forman, 1994; Gardner, 1983; Kolbe 1993; Veale, 1992; Wright 1991). As children develop the skills to construct with 3-dimensional media and to render their works with symbolic and decorative features, stories often emerge before, during, and after, the creative process. The children who created the 3-dimensional artworks, which were displayed in the gallery, had their own stories and play associated with their creations, well before their installations came to be exhibited. The power of these creations to evoke dialogue, story-making, and other forms of symbolization is the focus of the first part of this investigation.

During the children's visits to the gallery, it was noted that the 3-dimensional installations in timber, boxes and mixed media, evoked a great deal of dialogue, questioning, story-making, and expressive movement. These interactions were sometimes initiated by adults when they questioned children about their ideas and feelings about the artworks, or drew children's attention to the elements of art, or stimulated imaginative responses. However on many occasions it was observed that children spontaneously interacted with the artworks in imaginative ways, either individually, or in small groups of two to six children. For example, a series of boxes joined with masking tape and decorated with patty cake molds, became a "fairy train."

Movement responses to 3-dimensional installations were also noted, including spontaneous dancing around "Rapunzel's Castle" by a small group of children, and one child's tactile exploration of the "Coal-Making Machine," which led to a creative movement expression. This child spent quite some time exploring the sweeping lines of the installation by delicately moving her hand along the cane pieces several times. Each exploration was accompanied by a gentle sway of her body. She then performed a brief expressive movement piece in front of the installation, which again reflected her exploration of the sweeping forms.

Of all the installations in the exhibition, "The Giant" attracted the most interest. Children spent longer periods exploring him, and demonstrated more diverse kinds of responses than they did with other exhibits. Children would return to him many times during their visit, whereas with most other exhibits, children explored them once or twice only. Interactions surrounding "The Giant" were prolific and reflected all kinds of responses. Most frequent responses involved peering through the Giant's huge

flexible silver arms; lying on the floor to peer up into his insides; talking through the arms to a friend; wriggling into the Giant's belly to talk from inside the Giant; questioning adults about how the Giant was made; and theorizing about where he lived, what he ate, and what he did. The sign on the front of the Giant was also intriguing and many children asked what it said. Stories about golden eggs and where they came from were elicited from the written text as it was read to children.

Where there was an adult present interacting with children around an exhibit, the duration and the nature of the children's responses were notably longer and more complex. The power of the 3-dimensional exhibits to act as pivots for thinking with or without an adult present, became an important focus of the study.

Phase 2: Exploration of symbolic representation by student teachers within the context of the exhibition

The second phase of this study involved a pedagogical process within the art gallery, where the early childhood students and their lecturer (also the researcher) engaged in discussions and reflections on the power of children's art as a form of thinking.

This discussion lead naturally to the students thinking about ways they could extend children's expressions, stories theories, and discussions. Story-telling became a significant mode through which students felt the children's thinking could be extended. The lecturer then invited the students to create their own stories and offered them a framework for story development. This framework required them to think about a story topic, to construct a plot with characters, and to decide on a place and time in which the story would take place. In other words, a literary framework was used to prompt the story-making. Each tutorial group sought inspiration from the children's 3-dimensional installations without any suggestions from the lecturer to do so.

The free expression of ideas elicited stories entitled *" The Giants who live in the Forest," "In the Land of the Flowers"* and *"The Magic River in the Mirror,"* each of which was later narrated and dramatized within the gallery setting. Students used open-ended materials such as lengths of coloured, translucent fabric, hessian, crepe paper, cellophane, chairs, tables, and card-board to create their costumes, props and back-drop for their dramatization.

The lecturer documented their dramatizations with slides and photos, which were later used to aid reflection and critique. The purpose of this documentation was also to model ways in which teachers can gather data and use it to explore thinking, to share with others, and to stimulate further representation. Hence the entire pedagogical process, from its outset, was designed to model a pedagogical approach which could be enacted with children. The process of evaluation, which involved students critiquing their own work, helped to make this explicit.

Phase 3: Extending the symbolic representation through a process of sharing that representation with children

The third phase of the project involved sharing the students' stories with the children who had created the artworks; had attended the early childhood centers in which the works had been created and displayed; or had attended the exhibition. The lecturer hypothesized that this exchange would further stimulate children's thinking and representation through the expressive arts.

The children who did experience the stories were, in fact, provoked to create their own stories, movements, and dramatizations. One child created a story about his construction of a tractor that ate dragons and spat out their fire through its exhaust pipe. His rendition included a dramatic dragon dance where he flew around outside with *'fire'* behind him (holding a length of sparkling red fabric, and waving it around vigorously, as he *'flew'*).

Another child drew pictures of the little people in the forest and created a pretend play scenario with Giants who told the little people to move out of the forest whilst they made new houses. She invited her peers to help her make houses with large blocks up on a platform, and took on the role of a 'director giant' who had most of the ideas about building houses.

Another child came to kindergarten with a paper maché sculpture she had made of a pig called "Flash." The child shared her creation with the group, and the teacher decided that it was an appropriate moment to share the story "The Giants who Live in the Forest." Her thinking for doing so was that she foresaw the potential for story-making. After reading the story she inquired of the children as to what they might do with "Flash." They automatically commenced to make a story about "Flash the Flying Pig."

Phase 4: Ongoing exchanges of creative works between children and student teachers in their respective contexts

The most recent direction of the project involves regular exchanges of students' and children's creative works, particularly 3-dimensional installations and stories. The students who were involved with the project last year are continuing to explore arts curriculum and the potential for integration of the arts. They have worked on projects exploring the elements of art through 2- and 3-dimensional representation, and have explored ways in which they can represent their visual spatial thinking through other modes of expression, such as story, drama, music-making and dance.

Some of this work is now being shared with children to further provoke their thinking. Installations, which the students have made, and that can be transported, are being shared with the children at the children's early childhood centers. The teacher involved in working with these children is currently building the children's skills in using various media, and is keen to expose children to artworks and other forms of creative representation to provoke their interest in, and exploration of, diverse media.

Discussion

One of the challenges faced by teacher educators is to construct meaningful and educative field practicum experiences, where students can be mentored by 'more expert others.' Those engaged in the preservice preparation of teachers are constantly reflecting on the nature of student practicum, and attempting to improve it through constructive ways by: establishing closer liaisons with teachers in the field; setting up opportunities for teacher professional development; implementing mentoring programs; creating alternate practicums in other settings; or developing child and family centers on campus to provide students with lecturer-guided practicums. The list of creative and effective solutions is almost endless. The pedagogical process described in this project is one, which can potentially provide students with a form of learning, which *connects them with children's minds*.

Pedagogical Interchanges

The notion of pedagogical interchange is proposed, to describe the context in which children's thinking and students'thinking is exchanged. In this study, this context is referred to as the *Pedagogical Interchange Zone*. This zone is characterized by cognitive interdependence, whereas in the separate contexts of university and the early childhood program there is cognitive independence, ie. children are thinking, and representing that thinking, in their own unique ways, and simultaneously, students are engaged with their own processes of thinking and representation. When these two independent forms of representation come together, transactions in thinking take place, in the *Pedagogical Interchange Zone*.

Another goal is to *develop students' skills in curriculum planning*. The opportunity afforded to students through this exercise is to consider ways of extending children's thinking through artistic and literary modes. When they have direct experience in doing this themselves (ie. representing their ideas through each of the expressive arts), they are able to reflect on how children may be able to represent their ideas in different ways. The tangible process of seeing, or hearing about, children's symbolic representations through an interface with one or more early childhood settings, provides students with direct feedback on children's thinking.

Transactions in thinking in the study required two kinds of pedagogical mediators - *interpersonal and cognitive*. The *interpersonal mediators* in this project are the university lecturer/researcher and the teachers within the early childhood settings. These people play a significant role in sharing information between the tertiary context and the early childhood context; in transporting creative works to and from these contexts; in setting up the teaching and learning processes to facilitate creative expression in their respective contexts; and in facilitating reflection and critique with their own students.

The *cognitive mediators* are the symbolic representations of children and of students. The thinking of either group, as expressed in symbolic forms such as 3-dimensional representations, stories, and dramatic and movement enactments, is relayed to the other group via that symbolic medium. (e.g., the children's constructions were shared with the students, and the students' stories were shared with the children). Documentation is an essential part of this process. Students may see photos and stories of children's work rather than the actual artworks, or dramatizations. Children may see slides, photos, videos, or hear stories about the students' work rather than see it directly.

The transactions in thinking can happen without either group have face-to-face contact with the other. This is analogous to the experience children have in an art gallery where they don't get to meet the artists who have created the artworks, but they do form a 'relationship' with the artist through their interactions with the artworks, and the artists form 'relationships' with the viewers of their works.

Following their visit to the gallery, children may represent their experiences of the artworks through play in some form, or be stimulated to create artworks of their own. Hence a cognitive and affective exchange is taking place without face-to-face interaction.

Conclusions:

Observations of students engaged in symbolic representation reveal that they use similar processes to that of children when they are generating ideas to be represented through the symbol systems of art, drama, music, story, and dance. One form of representation triggers the cross-modal thinking of another. Within expressive arts workshops, students frequently choose to build on the ideas expressed by those around them. For example, a large mural of a storm created by one group of students triggered another group to create a 'tornado' dance with musical accompaniment. The analogy to the biological process of metamorphosis is pertinent here, as it describes the change from one form to another form. Cross-modal connections occur between the various art forms through the use of visual, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic and musical symbols.

Art offers extensive opportunities for student teachers and for children to make sense of the world they know, but also affords them opportunities to explore imagined worlds. The 3-dimensional constructions "Rapunzel's Castle" and "The Giant" exemplify children's capacities to create imagined places and beings. The stories generated by children who explored these creations within the gallery illuminated the potential for imaginative symbolization through language and symbolic play with art media through gesture, sound, dance, and dramatic enactment. This same process of integration of symbols into a fantasy or creative story is one with which the students are engaged.

The project exemplifies several theoretical perspectives in action. Firstly, it exemplifies constructivist theory, as both children and students are constructing their own knowledge and representing that through their respective symbolic expressions. Secondly, it exemplifies a philosophy of partnership in action, as it is through the sharing of each group's thinking that further thinking is facilitated. Thirdly, it exemplifies Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence, as children and students are choosing to represent their thinking through visual-spatial, linguistic, interpersonal, kinesthetic, and musical means. Fourthly, it exemplifies Eisner's curriculum theory in action, where children are provided with opportunities to cultivate 'multiple forms of literacy' (1990:55). Finally, it exemplifies, a pedagogical approach within a tertiary setting that can directly connect preservice early childhood teachers to the minds of young children.

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